

The Rise of the “Innosumer” – How Babyboomers Will Shape the Future of Consumer Products

Aging is among the most striking societal changes that highly industrialized economies face. While a number of related challenges, such as the increasing pressure on social security systems, are being widely addressed by policy makers, the consequences of demographic changes for innovation systems and processes have surprisingly not been a major research topic. The implications and challenges of demographic changes for innovation remain a puzzle for public policy-makers, managers and civil society alike: While aging calls for innovative solutions to help solving some of the societal problems associated with demographic changes, it still remains unclear, whether aging societies may prove to stay as innovative as today. To be able to provide innovative solutions, companies have to understand changing demand and consumption patterns in aging societies in order to remain competitive. And policy makers have to foster conditions under which innovators can meet the demands of an aging society. This is crucial for both, companies in order to remain competitive, and societies in order to improve the facilitation of individual aging.

This paper focuses on a misconception in current thinking about the relationship between technology and aging, which is likely to constitute a major barrier to tackle future challenges of innovation in aging societies: Innovators perceive aging users as mere recipients of new technological products and services that will compensate for physical shortcomings usually associated with individual aging. For consumer products in general, aging users are at best seen as *potential* consumers for which special arrangements have to be made. While this is clearly an important perspective, it – and this is the central point of the present paper – does not recognize the full set of innovation opportunities in aging societies, when more and more *baby boomers* will soon reach the age of retirement. Against this background, the paper sets out to establish a symmetrical perspective on technology and aging that does not merely reproduce the cliché of the passive and powerless user, but that focuses on the user as an active partaker in innovation. As we shall see below, this paper claims the aging baby boomers should be taken seriously as consumers in the full sense. Indeed, it is the baby boomers that will shape the future of consumption in a number of industrial sectors. Only in a symmetrical perspective on technology and aging, the full-blown consequences of this will become understandable and thus accessible for policy makers and innovators alike.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we flesh out a dominant model that underlies mainstream research on technology and aging. We show that this model implies a twofold misconception – one indeed due to a pessimistic view on individual aging, and another due to a neglect the many roles users and use can have in innovation processes. The paper then develops a critique of the dominant model on technology and aging that is based on insights from Science, Technology, and Innovation Studies (STI-studies), and it proposes a complementary model. In this complementary model, the whole range of roles comes into sight through which elderly users become important for innovators. In Section 3, we present preliminary data in support of the new model. In particular, we identify the growing importance of active, well-informed, and wealthy older adults as shaping the future of

consumption in a number of industrial sectors. In Section 4, finally, we introduce the notion of the “Innosumer”, and show that innovation success in aging societies to a significant degree depends on appreciating this new form of aging consumers.

In a nutshell, this paper makes three contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on innovation and technological change by highlighting a number of pertinent changes in the way consumption will become more closely integrated in the process of innovation. Secondly, it provides insights for innovation managers and policy makers in order to tackle some of the challenges associated with innovation in aging societies. Thirdly, it highlights that the current image of older adults is in need of revision. Last but not least, therefore, the paper contributes to a new perspective of the aging consumer – not as somebody merely in need of assistance by technology, but as a *vanguard user* whose consumption patterns will co-shape tomorrow’s technology.